

PROTECT AND ENHANCE THE VILLAGES

5

Overview

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness in the country about development patterns and their impact on community character. Many communities have come to realize that the residential 'sprawl' and commercial 'strip' development, which has characterized much of America over the past 50 years, is not what they want for their communities.

Instead, many people are looking to create village-style development patterns that are pedestrian-friendly and create a sense of place. Places where people can live, work, shop and play with reduced dependency on motor vehicles

One of the unique things about Stonington is that it already has not one - but four - such villages in the community. Moreover, the villages of Mystic, Pawcatuck, Borough of Stonington, and to a lesser degree, Old Mystic are focal points in the daily life of the community and defining elements of the Town. To reinforce their overall importance, it is estimated that more than half of Stonington's residents live within its two main villages and the Borough of Stonington.

Protecting and enhancing these villages is critical to maintaining community character and quality of life in Stonington.

Stonington's villages are focal points in the daily life of the community and defining elements of the Town ...

Borough of Stonington

Despite being considered one of Stonington's three main villages and making significant contributions to the overall character of Town, the Borough of Stonington functions as a separate and distinct political jurisdiction.

The recommendations of this Chapter are not intended to apply to the Borough of Stonington, whose Planning and Zoning Commission regulates its land uses in accordance with its own regulations and Plan of Conservation and Development.

Mystic



Pawcatuck



Stonington's villages are major contributors to community character and the quality of life of many residents.

Reinforce Village Development Patterns

Stonington's villages developed at a time when compact, mixed-use development patterns were a necessity and not a choice. Employment, basic goods and services, schools, and churches were all within walking distance for village residents.

The advent of the automobile initiated a decline of American villages. People felt that new development on the outskirts of a community somehow would translate to a higher quality of life.

Sadly, there are indications that the adoption of zoning further eroded some villages by imposing suburban development patterns of larger lots, deeper building setbacks, suburban parking requirements and single-purpose zones.

Define Village Boundaries

The first step in protecting and enhancing the villages is for the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) to define the boundaries between the villages and the rural areas of Stonington. The map on the facing page suggests possible village boundaries based upon the current and potential extent of sewer service.

In addition to establishing different 'program areas' (village development patterns inside and rural development patterns outside), these boundaries can be reinforced with landscaping and signage at key gateways into the villages to add to their sense of place.

Develop Village Plans

Once firm village boundaries are established, the PZC should prepare comprehensive plans for each village to guide future land use decisions within them. Such plans should clearly define the character of each village and provide guidance on how new development can best blend with that character. In both Mystic and Pawcatuck, extra attention should be given to guiding land uses adjacent to the Mystic and Pawcatuck Rivers to protect water quality, secure open space or access easements and ultimately create riverwalks.

Pawcatuck



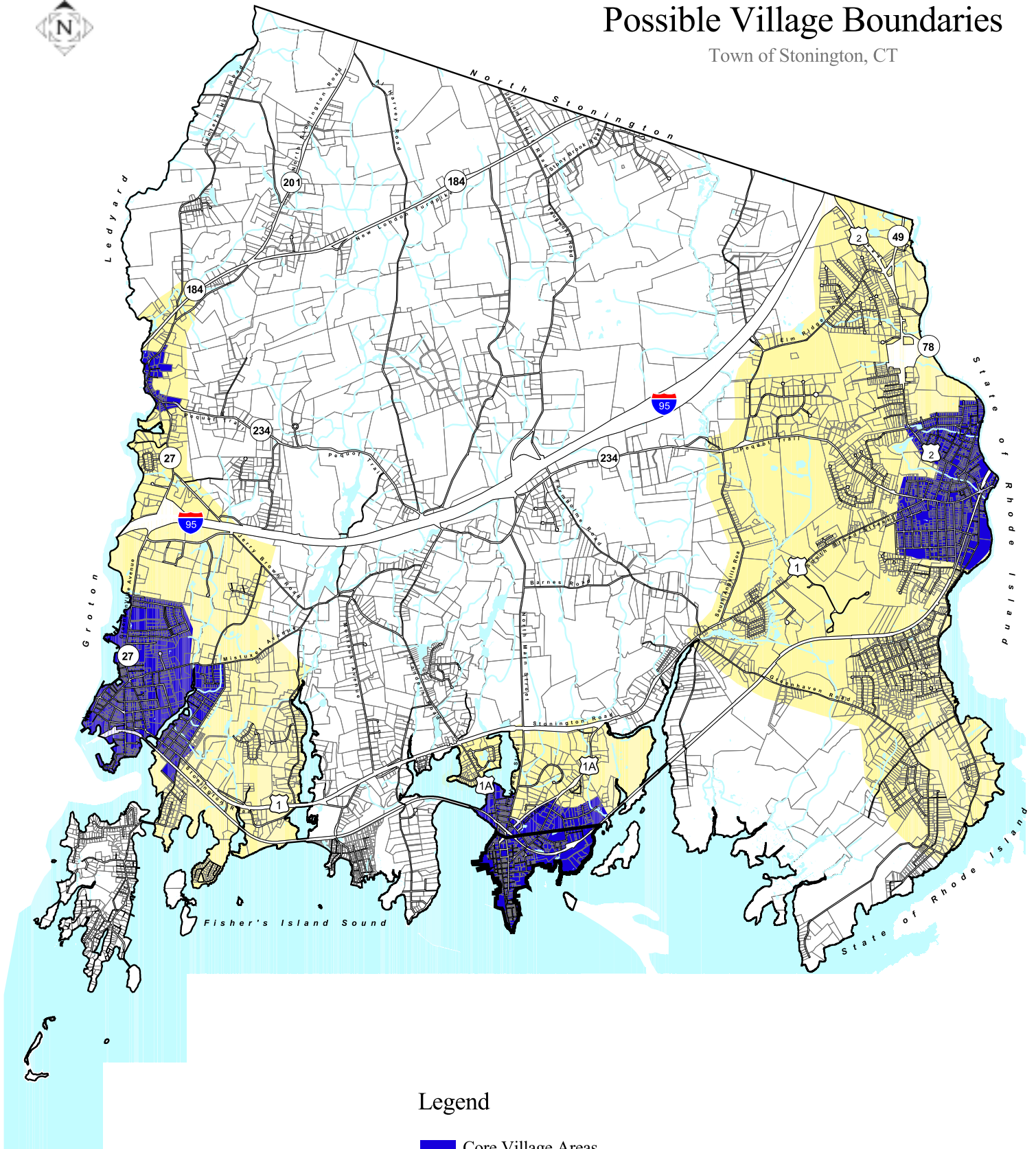
Mystic








Possible Village Boundaries

Town of Stonington, CT



Legend

-  Core Village Areas
-  Village Fringe
-  Stonington Borough

0 4000 Feet

Village Standards

In order to be effective, the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) should establish architectural standards to ensure that future development or redevelopment will be compatible with the character of each village (Mystic, Old Mystic and Pawcatuck).

Other standards governing such elements as building setback, parking, sidewalks and signs can be used to ensure that the design and layout of development emulates the village development patterns of old.

For example, new commercial development might front on wide tree-lined sidewalks with parking to the side or rear of the building and pedestrian scaled signage, oriented towards the sidewalk.

Establish Village Districts

One of the more powerful tools for protecting and enhancing village character is the “village district”. Authorized by the State Legislature to protect the architectural and historical integrity of villages, the Village District Act enables planning and zoning commissions to stringently control the design and appearance of development within villages - a power typically reserved for historic district commissions.

The Planning and Zoning Commission should consider establishing village districts in Mystic, Old Mystic, and Pawcatuck. If either the Borough or Town considers establishing a village district in or near their mutual boundary, such a proposal should be the subject of close cooperation between the respective agencies.

Since mixed uses in the same building and on adjacent properties contribute to the overall character and ambience of the villages in Stonington, mixed-use development should be encouraged in the village districts. Upper floor residential and office uses located over first-floor small businesses will enhance the streetscape and provide opportunities for small offices as well as small, affordable rental housing units within walking distance of goods and services.

This diversity of use and activity in multi-story buildings makes for vibrant, active places with a strong sense of place. Stonington residents recognize this. In fact, three-quarters of residents surveyed felt that the Town should encourage a variety of uses within the villages.

While the charm of Stonington’s villages makes them ideal locations for tourist oriented boutiques and galleries, retail and service uses should also address basic village needs to reduce the need for driving to suburban shopping destinations.

Institutional uses such as churches, social clubs and fraternal organizations should be permitted by Special Use Permit within the villages. Not only can they draw their memberships from within the villages, they also attract regular visitors to the villages, who support local businesses.

Alternative housing options for active-adults could also be mutually beneficial to both residents and businesses placing residents within walking distance of everyday goods and services.

Mixed-Use Development



Institutional Use



Mystic

Town of Stonington, CT



Proposed
Dinghy
Dock

Possible
Rope
Ferry

Train Station
Visitors Center

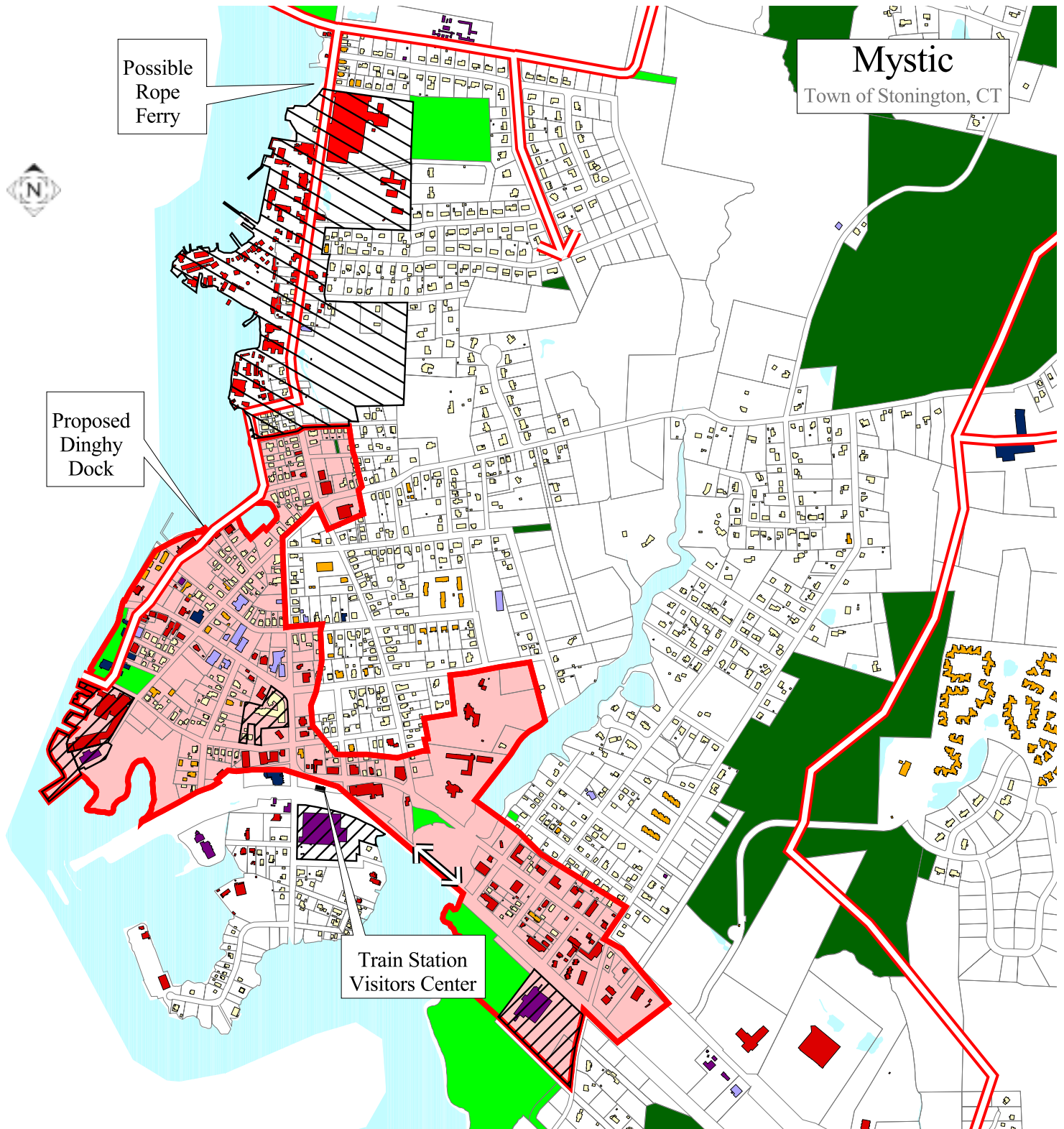
Existing

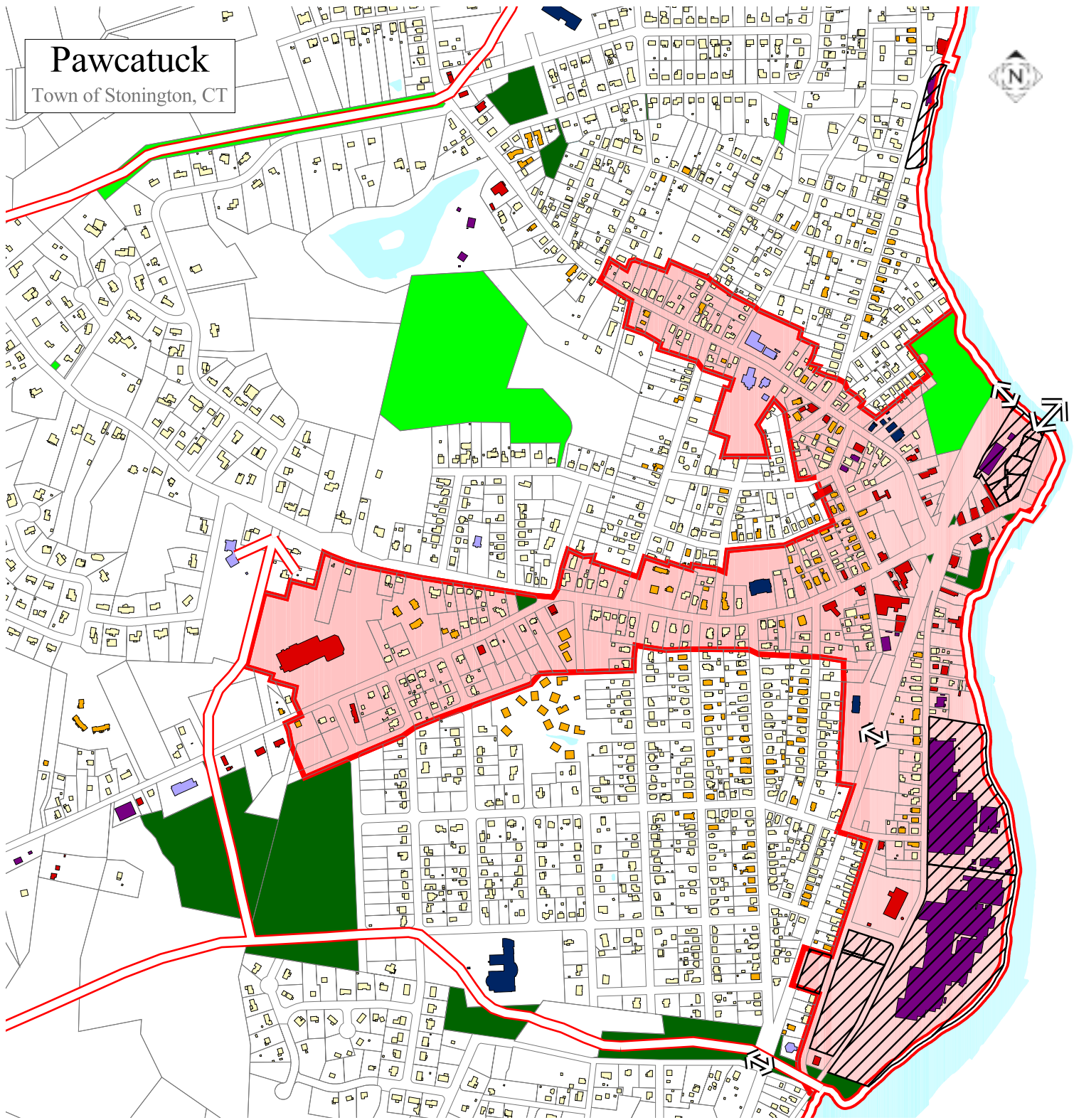
- Single Family
- Multi-family
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Community Facility
- Institutional Other
- Dedicated Open Space
- Managed Open Space

Conceptual

- Village District
- Greenway Trail
- Pedestrian Linkage
- Mill Redevelopment Area
- Maritime Historical/ Educational Zone

0 400 800 Feet





Pawcatuck

Town of Stonington, CT



0 400 800 Feet

Existing

- Single Family
- Multi-family
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Community Facility
- Institutional Other
- Dedicated Open Space
- Managed Open Space

Conceptual

- Village District
- Greenway Trail
- Pedestrian Underpass/Overpass
- Mill Redevelopment Areas

Enhance Walkable Villages

Maintaining and enhancing pedestrian access throughout Stonington's villages will continue to contribute to community character and quality of life by reducing traffic, parking and dependence on motor vehicles as well as promoting a healthier, more convenient environment for residents and visitors. Nearly three-quarters of residents surveyed agreed that the Town should do more to create walkable villages.

Creating a walkable village requires sidewalks that are appropriately sized for their use, safe pedestrian street crossings, streetscape amenities such as shade trees, seating areas and pedestrian scaled lighting, and even pedestrian oriented business signage such as on windows and awnings.

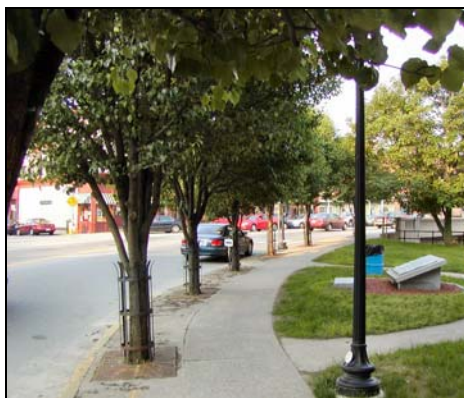
In the village of Pawcatuck, where there are three public schools and a parochial school, pedestrian access within walking distance of the schools should be a priority. Public parks, libraries, community centers and other points of interest should also be a priority. Pedestrian safety at crosswalks should be maintained through signage, pavement marking and other improvements.

Implement the Pawcatuck Riverwalk

The redevelopment of the mills in Pawcatuck should provide several opportunities to reclaim portions of the Pawcatuck riverfront for recreational use as part of the Pawcatuck Riverwalk.

Extending the riverwalk along the rear of the Mechanic Street mills would create an ideal pedestrian and bicycle link between the mills and downtown Pawcatuck, adding to the vitality of both areas and the quality of life of the village as a whole.

Pawcatuck



Mystic



Sidewalk Standards

Sidewalks in the commercial portions of the village districts zones should be provided on both sides of the street and at least eight feet in width if possible. Even wider sidewalks are needed for seasonal outdoor dining.

Coordinated streetscape elements such as lighting, benches, trash receptacles and tree grates, can create an attractive, comfortable pedestrian environment and add significantly to community character and sense of place.

Burial of overhead utilities in these areas can also greatly enhance the streetscape by eliminating overhead wires and allowing the unimpeded growth of street trees.

Outside of the commercial areas, sidewalks should be located on both sides of major streets and at least one side of residential side streets. Five foot widths allow pedestrians to walk side by side and comfortably pass. Sidewalks should be either integrated into curbs or separated by several feet to accommodate an area large enough for grass to thrive.

Stonington's mills provide an incredible opportunity to address changing community needs while enhancing community character and quality of life.

Reuse the Mills and Other Underutilized Commercial and Industrial Sites

Master Plan the Larger Mill Sites

Stonington's historic mills hold great potential for economic development and increased vitality within the villages.

While some of these buildings have become functionally obsolete in terms of their original uses, they are well located relative to existing villages and have untapped potential to help meet some of the housing and other needs anticipated in the community. Two-thirds of residents surveyed agreed that the Town should create flexible regulations to encourage the adaptive reuse of the mills.

For mill redevelopment efforts to be successful and enhance the overall village ambience, flexibility in permitted uses will be desirable. Some of the mills would provide a unique and attractive environment for small-scale business uses such as offices, restaurants, boutiques, art studio/galleries and antique markets - supporting Stonington's already strong tourist economy.

Mills represent a significant opportunity to address many of Stonington's housing needs and some may be suitable for combinations of affordable, luxury, active-adult and elderly housing for both rent and sale. Due to the unique configuration of sites and buildings, residential densities may be higher than is typical in new construction but still be appropriate for the village location given the size of the building and the availability of parking.

Of unique concern is the Velvet Mill which straddles the line between the Town and Borough, although all of the buildings lie within the Borough. Redevelopment of this property will require close cooperation between the planning and zoning commissions for both jurisdictions.

Require Redevelopment Plans

Because of their size and potential impact on surrounding neighborhoods, the larger mill sites should be required to prepare redevelopment master plans that identify the general location of uses, access, parking and drainage facilities, as well as identify:

- which structures are to be rehabilitated; and
- which architecturally or historically insignificant structures are to be removed to facilitate redevelopment.

A design development district (perhaps called an "Industrial Heritage Overlay Zone") could incorporate such a master planning process and allow development flexibility, while respecting the architectural and historic integrity of the mill sites.

Careful planning will be required to ensure the compatibility of a broad mix of uses and avoid conflicts arising from noise, vibration, odors, parking and other impacts.

The Economic Development Commission has initiated a planning program called “Rivision” that is designed to study the revitalization of Pawcatuck’s five mills. The program successfully kicked off with the Cogswell Street Charrette (in co-operation with the National Park Service).

Following that success, the Pawcatuck Revitalization Organization has been re-instituted to study the creation of a Neighborhood Revitalization Zone on Mechanic Street and take advantage of a Community Economic Development Fund grant to study the 20 acre Harris Graphics site at 99/100 Mechanic Street and downtown Pawcatuck.

Overall Concept from Cogswell Street Charrette

